

Drug crusader unwilling to let sleeping dogs lie

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NORWALK — A dog's account of watching his young owner succumb to drug abuse was read to fourth-graders at Brookside Elementary School Thursday in a trial of a program that discourages children from using drugs and helps parents and teachers provide support in avoiding them.

Only one-third of parents talk to their children about drugs, said Virginia "Ginger" Katz, co-author of "Sunny's Story," before entering a classroom to observe teacher Dorothy Brown read the first half of the book to her class.

Katz, founder and president of the Courage to Speak Foundation, has led a 10-year campaign against drug abuse by young people following the death of her 20-year-old son, Ian James Eaccarino, of a heroin overdose in 1996.

The cover of the book includes a photograph of Ian holding his beagle, Sunny, and the story told by the dog represents an account of the struggle Katz and her husband, Larry, Ian's stepfather, went through trying to save him from drug addiction.

Teachers reading the book to their students is part of an eight-unit curriculum that includes chapters on avoiding tobacco and alcohol, which Sunny recounts witnessing Ian use drugs while in high school, along with developing a friendship with a drug dealer.

"As they hear Sunny's story, (students) are going to vow not to use drugs," Katz said.

Katz, who co-wrote the book with Marci Alborghetti, said the last four units of the program will be taught by Brookside's physical education teacher, Tim Downey, and nurse, Angela Vicenzi. She praised Brookside's principal, David Hay, for opening his school's three fourth-grade classes for a trial of the program.

Katz said the elementary school program has been funded by the Fairfield County Community Foundation and the Norwalk Redevelopment Agency.

The book is targeted at youngsters 8 to 13 years old and their parents, and is available for \$12.95 at the Web site www.couragetospeak.org or by calling (877) 431-3295.

Katz will discuss the book and the school program at "The Courage to Speak Empowering Youth to be Drug Free Family Night 2007" March 6 at West Rocks Middle School. She said it will be the foundation's third annual family night, and is open to parents and students from Norwalk and other communities.